



the CRAYFISH TALE

WHAT GOOD ARE CRAYFISH?

While still in knee pants, I found that crayfish were good. Good to play with, at least. One day my dad came home from catching crayfish, and left a jute sack full of them by the house stoop. I did not see the crayfish at first. I heard them. From the inside of the sack came that strange sound that only scores of crayfish can make. As if they were all talking to each other saying, Hey, where's the exit?

Later the crayfish in the jute sack were transported to our kitchen sink, and now I could also see them as they were scurrying around looking for the exit. At least that's what I assumed they were doing, having been caught in some of my father's crayfish traps all night long. Later I learned that my father was spending weekends catching crayfish to augment his air force income.

So here is the first of some of the many "goods" of crayfish. Crayfish are fun to play with. At least if you are in knee pants.

FOOD

But the most common of the "goods" of crayfish, is in the eating department. Crayfish are eaten all over the world. My home country is notorious for appreciating crayfish, and every fall Swedes gather under festive lights and commit themselves to the rite of consuming crayfish.

Most European countries share in this tradition. From France with their ecrevisse, and to Germany with their Krebs

and into Russia, Europeans have developed lasting customs of eating crayfish. Even the monks of Bavarian cloisters have enjoyed eating crayfish during lent.

Although Africa was long devoid of crayfish for some reason, modern Africans have developed a taste for these crustaceans, and in several places today you can harvest crayfish that were originally transplanted from Louisiana. The same red swamp crawfish that Cajuns introduced themselves to after they were forced out of Acadia in Canada.

The tradition of eating crayfish even spread to China where they were originally introduced from Japan, who also has a crayfish culture. But in China, the newcomers imported from Louisiana became so popular that they even managed to convert some Chinese to raise crayfish instead of rice. It turned out so successfully that now China exports crayfish all over the world, including Sweden.

In Louisiana people say "suck the head; pinch the tail". So eating crayfish is certainly another "good" of crayfish.

BAIT

But there are more good uses of crayfish. How about their use as bait? Especially in the US, many fishermen swear by using small crayfish as bait for catching cat fish and large mouth bass. Actually, this habit is likely one of the main reasons some species spread around our

country. Bait shops all over our country are likely to offer live crayfish for fishermen who prefer this bait. And what happens to leftover bait at end of day? Often a fisherman with leftover crayfish bait, either dumps them into the lake where he was fishing, or gives them to someone to dispose of any way they want.

The history of the spread of the rusty crayfish in and around the Great Lakes can be explained this way. The highly invasive rusty crayfish, native to the Ohio River basin, has shown up even down in New Mexico. Now that's a little far for a crayfish to walk. How about being shipped as bait?

MEDICAL SCIENCE

When in biology class in high school, I was introduced to dissection using the lowly earth worm. Nowadays a likely subject for teaching this invasive study is the crayfish. Biology 110 at the Penn State Altoona campus teaches its students the anatomy of a crayfish to get 'a better understanding of the anatomy of invertebrate animals in general.' A class duplicated on numerous campuses over the world.

WATER QUALITY

Just as the canary bird, used as an indicator of air quality in coal mines, the crayfish has spent a similar role in our water ways. Crayfish are sensitive to the quality of water and react quickly to changes in its chemical composition. Thus they have become biological monitors forecasting water conditions. That they are sensitive to water qualities becomes obvious to those of us who try to catch crayfish in different lakes, all of which show some difference in crayfish populations.

PETS

When our kids were small, my wife and I had an aquarium. It was perfectly

natural that when I came home with a bunch of live crayfish, a few of them ended up in the aquarium, much to the delight of our two children. But soon we also discovered that aquarium fish and crayfish don't really get along well. Soon one after the other of the docile goldfish disappeared, and finally even the few leaves of algae in the water were gone. Yes, crayfish are omnivorous.

So when kept in an aquarium, crayfish are best kept alone. They can be of great interest to all family members while displaying interesting characteristics like shell molting, mating and maybe eventually cannibalism.

Some people specialize in keeping crayfish of various colors, and the blue crayfish has become popular in aquariums along with whites and those of orange color. Crayfish are relatively easy to take care of and are educational and popular with kids. As some crayfish are aggressive and tend to fight, it pays off to give them plenty of hideouts in the aquarium.

ECOLOGY

Crayfish are important and valuable in nature. They play a significant role in breaking down dead plant material while promoting decomposition and recycling. In streams and lakes, crayfish may be the most important link in the aquatic food chain. Crayfish eat waterweeds, algae and aquatic animals. But crayfish, in turn, are eaten by dozens of other wild animal species. Otters, mink, herons, bears and raccoons and other wildlife like to feast on crayfish. Bull frog and smallmouth bass feed on crayfish. My own experience shows that even trout eat crayfish of surprising size.

There is much "good" about our precious crayfish. Let's protect them. What would happen if all of the crayfish in a lake or stream were suddenly removed or killed?

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